

Opening Statement of U.S. Senator Blanche Lincoln  
Committee on House Administration  
Wednesday, November 7, 2007  
1:00 p.m.

Chairman Brady and Ranking Member Ehlers, I want to thank you for holding this hearing today to examine a very important issue that has gone unrecognized for far too long. Even though our majestic Capitol has served as a meeting place for both the House of Representatives and the United States Senate for nearly two centuries, it was only more recently that public attention has been given to the fact that slave laborers were involved in constructing this building which is the center of our Legislative Branch of Government.

As a member of the task force to study the contributions of slave laborers in the construction of the U.S. Capitol, I am honored and humbled to take part in this process to put forward recommendations to honor and recognize slave laborers who were instrumental in constructing the building which is recognized as a symbol of freedom and democracy here at home and around the world.

Here, the hopes and dreams of the people of this nation are presented through their elected representatives in Congress. Here, the concerns and priorities of our constituents are voiced and debated. Here, democracy sets the course of the future of our great nation and the slave laborers who helped build the Capitol are a part of that story and it's a story we should tell.

When we started this task force, one thing I wanted to make sure we did was include a variety of viewpoints. In addition to including Members of Congress on the task force, I thought it was important to include citizens who don't live and work in and around the Capitol on a regular basis. I wanted to ensure we considered the vantage point of a visitor to the Capitol and what manner of recognition they thought would be effective in telling this story.

In that spirit, I was pleased that Curtis Sykes, a respected historian and native of North Little Rock Arkansas, was appointed to serve on this panel. Sadly, Mr. Sykes passed away in September but I am grateful he was able to contribute to the work of the task force before his passing. In addition to many other accomplishments as an educator and community leader, Mr. Sykes was an original member of Arkansas' Black History Advisory Committee established in 1991 and faithfully and diligently served as its chairman from 1993 until his death.

Mr. Sykes recommendations on this task force were focused on wanting to ensure that as many citizens as possible be made aware of the contributions of enslaved African Americans in building the Capitol whether they were visiting Washington or learning about the Capitol from afar. Mr. Sykes also thought it was important to put a human face on the experience of slaves who helped build the Capitol and that visitors should be able to get a sense of who they were and what their work and daily-life was like.

I think those are constructive recommendations and I believe the recommendations we are putting forward embody those goals. As we move forward, I hope historians and researchers can incorporate genealogical and other records which will shed light on the enslaved individuals we are focusing on and their families so current and future generations can learn about these workers and better understand who they were.

I also believe we should utilize technology to produce an interactive presentation that can become an effective teaching tool. In bringing this subject to life, I think it is helpful to engage as many senses as possible in terms of sight, sound and touch. By incorporating interactive features on line or in an exhibit, it can help transport students of all ages to a place in time that might otherwise be difficult to envision.

Finally, Mr. Chairman, I think it is important that we recognize and acknowledge this subject in the Capitol building itself. That is the building slave laborers helped construct and I think that there should be a recognition within the building to reflect that.

We know of at least 4 places on the Senate side of the Capitol where slave labor contributed to the construction of the Capitol building. Slave laborers contributed to completion of columns in the Old Senate Chamber, and exposed original stone work we know of on the first, second and third floors on the Senate side in what is known as the East Front Extension of the Capitol. (near S 104-108; near S 203-206 and near S 303-307).

I'm also very supportive of focusing attention on this issue in the new Capitol Visitor Center and believe that will provide an opportunity to reach a large number of visitors who come from all over the world and the country to see this beautiful building every year.

In closing, Mr. Chairman, I want to thank you again for holding this hearing today. I also want to thank my colleagues on the task force, Congressman Lewis, Congressman Watts, Sarah Davidson and others for their hard work and efforts. I also want to express my appreciation to the Clerk of the House, Lorraine Miller, and her staff for helping us with this project. They've been terrific to work with and they should be commended. It's been a real honor to work with this distinguished group and I will always be grateful for the opportunity.

